

Chicago railway blues described as heading for dead end without change

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Chicago could end up being tossed off the beaten track if it doesn't get its tangled railways issues straightened out, the Better Government Association (BGA) warned recently.

Experts say Windy City gridlock can account for a third of the total time it takes a freight train to cross the United States, and fixing Chicago's 4,000 miles of rail track, along with other infrastructure maintenance projects, have been deferred to a breaking point, the BGA contends. It can take 26 to 30 hours to simply get through the area by rail, the group says.

The piecemeal development of the track system created today's problems, as it was established to accommodate 30 freight railroads that once operated in the area. While that figure was consolidated to the six major railroads and two short-line railroads that now pass through Chicago, the crisscrossing tracks still accommodate 25 percent of the freight trains that move across the country, as well as 50 percent of the intermodal trains.

According to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, approximately 1,300 freight and passenger trains move through the area every day, the BGA reports. The trains compete for position through choke points like the 75th Street corridor, a portion of track that stretches from Evergreen Park to the Dan Ryan Expressway. The corridor is a meeting point for four freight lines and two passenger lines, creating a bottleneck that is one of the worst in the nation.

The congestion also accounts for the high collision rate at Chicago's railroad crossing. Between 2011 and 2016, Cook County saw 293 collisions that killed 48 people and caused 135 injuries.

These problems have not gone entirely unaddressed, but solutions require significant funding. In 2003, the private railroads running through the Chicago area and a group of government agencies founded CREATE, a consortium to improve the city's rail infrastructure. CREATE has raised \$1.4 billion, which has allowed it to make progress on upgrades, such as building a flyover railroad bridge in Englewood.

The group has completed 28 out its 70 projects, as well as begun work on another 23, and its efforts have reduced the transit time through Chicago from 48 hours in the early 2000s to as little as 26 hours today. This figure is still extremely high considering that freight trains can cross the entire country in three days, including their time moving through Chicago.

The BGA highlighted four projects proposed through CREATE that stand to make a significant difference in transit times through Chicago. Along the 75th Street corridor, the consortium has proposed adding more tracks to Belt Junction, an area that sees 13 tracks narrow to two. The plans for the corridor also include two flyover railroad bridges, which would alleviate bottlenecks and allow Amtrak to divert passenger train traffic from Union Station to LaSalle Street Station and enable Union Station renovations. According to the BGA, Union Station currently does not have the facilities, including platforms and entrances, to efficiently facilitate its high passenger volume, leading to reduced train turnover.

While CREATE has plans that could alleviate Chicago's rail traffic, it does not have the funds needed to carry them out. The consortium has requested grant funding that combined with contributions from its members would cover some costs priority projects but not all of them. Stakeholders from various sides of the issue have proposed alternate funding sources.

Two railroads that currently travel through the area are considering bypassing Chicago in a joint marketing and operating agreement that would see them divert their trains through Vancouver. Shippers are also becoming increasingly able to bypass rail shipment altogether, with the widened Panama Canal now matched by several Atlantic ports that can accommodate large container ships.

Chicago accommodates more than \$1 trillion worth of rail freight each year, a figure poised for growth thanks to the strength of e-commerce. Without improved infrastructure, however, the city could easily lose this economic strength, the BGA warns.